

Dr. Robert A. Peterson, Christology, Session 1, Introduction Overview

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This is Dr. Robert Peterson in his teaching on Christology. This is session 1, Introduction Overview.

Welcome, I am Robert Peterson. After teaching Systematic Theology for 35 years at two Evangelical seminaries, I retired five years ago and am still active, part-time, writing and editing. Welcome to our course on Christology, and let's pray even before we start.

Gracious Father, thank you for your word, for revealing yourself to us. Thank you that your word centers on your son. Teach us about him, we pray, and we pray in his own holy name. Amen.

Overview of our course. We begin with the introduction, defining some terms, talking about the concept of mystery, of which the person of Christ is one of the two big ones in Scripture, and then some of the strengths and weaknesses of Systematic Theology. Then, tracing the roots of our understanding of the doctrine of Christ to the early church, we'll work with patristic Christology for a number of lectures, culminating in the great statement at Nicaea, Council of Nicaea in 325, which unambiguously affirmed the deity of Christ, and then the great Christological Council of Chalcedon in 451, which was the result of the church's laborious understanding of the one person of Christ, who in his incarnation and forever has two natures.

And then, in future lectures, modern Christology will be traced from the Enlightenment of the 18th century to our time, and what different approach was taken then from in the early church, as we'll see. And then, finally, Systematic Theology, building upon the historical background, and here we'll focus on four great passages, and I wanted to combine them with the crucial doctrines of the person of Christ. So, John 1 and the Incarnation, Hebrews 1 and the deity of our Lord, Colossians 1 and his humanity, also could have been the source of a study for his deity; it contains both, of course.

We'll study the unity of Christ, but then the fourth great passage is Philippians 2, and that is the *textus classicus*, the classical text of the two states of Christ, the state of humiliation and the state of exaltation. Introduction: First of all, let me at least define some systematic terms that we will use in future lectures. Pre-existence means that although Jesus' humanity began in Mary's womb in Bethlehem, he, as the second person of the Trinity, existed for all eternity.

He pre-existed his human existence as God the Son. The Incarnation is the word that we use to speak of the fact that the eternal, almighty God became a human being in Jesus of Nazareth. It is a great miracle, and God used the means of the virginal conception, traditionally called virgin birth.

Technically, the birth of our Lord was normal. The conception was supernatural, and that is what we call the virgin birth; we really mean the virginal conception, that the Holy Spirit caused Jesus to be conceived within his mother Mary's womb. As a result of the Incarnation, we will look at the categories of Christ's deity, that he is fully God, distinct from yet equal to the Father and the Holy Spirit, and as a result of the Incarnation, he is now fully man.

His humanity, we will study, is a neglected aspect. We rightly defend his deity over against liberal and cultic denials. We wrongly de-emphasize his humanity as if emphasizing that somehow encroached upon his deity.

It does not. Both are essential to his person and as we will see, both are essential for his saving work. The unity of the person is best understood in light of the historical background, which we'll look at beginning today, Lord willing.

He is one person, an ever-sincere Incarnation with two natures forever. The two states' doctrine is a post-Reformation understanding; although the Reformers didn't use that language, they understood the concepts of Jesus. How is Jesus in heaven now different from Jesus on earth? The answer is not that he is no longer a man; that is a common misunderstanding or misconception. The answer is found in the doctrine of the two states.

His state of humiliation is everything from his conception to his burial. What a sad world for the Son of God to be buried. Think of that.

That is just a terrible indictment of our sin that he needed to be buried to save us anyway. His state of exaltation is everything from his resurrection through his second coming. He's the same person, but his life is lived out very differently in those two states.

Continuing our introduction after defining those basic theological terms, I want to talk about the concept of mystery because the Christian faith has two great mysteries. One is the doctrine of the Trinity, and the other is the doctrine of the two natures in the person of Christ. I'll define mystery as a divinely revealed paradox, antinomy, mystery that we can understand in part but that then goes beyond human reason.

The key here is that it's divinely revealed. The Bible plainly teaches there's one God in both Testaments. In the Incarnation, we eventually learn after his resurrection that

the Son is also God, and Pentecost shows us that the Holy Spirit likewise is God. Thus, there's one God who eternally exists in three persons.

The three persons are inseparable, and yet they must be distinguished. Furthermore, they are equal in glory, power, and deity. And another ramification biblically is that the three persons mutually indwell one another.

How God can be three in one at the same time is partially answered by appealing to philosophical and theological categories. The threeness and the oneness are not in the same regard; that's fine, it's true, and yet, at the end of the day, we cannot fully comprehend. And yet we're faced with it, and to end up either in denying it either in tritheism on the one hand, multiple gods, which is absurd, or confusing the persons, or denying the deity of the Son, or the personality of the Holy Spirit, it's just as bad on the other side.

So here is a divinely revealed mystery. God is three in one. To use Tertullian's term, that has stuck.

He is a trinitas, a trinity, three in one. The other big mystery revealed by God is that the Son of God, after his incarnation, is one person in two natures. The baby in the manger is God.

The baby in the womb of Mary is God. How can we comprehend this? Only in part. We'll see that part of the job of the church in its history and wrestling with the truths of Scripture, especially against errors.

We're going to say in a moment much of Christology as Trinitarian theology is controversy theology, forged amidst contests, attacks, and struggles of the Orthodox to understand God's teaching in light of heterodoxy. But ultimately, it is mysterious that this person is both God and man at the same time. That he knows all things, as his disciples finally confess.

Now we know that you know all things and don't need anyone to teach you, they say in the upper room discourses. But Jesus himself said no one knows the hour of his return, not even the Son. Just to clear that one up real quickly, he said it in a state of humiliation while on earth.

And we're going to argue later on. He has all of his divine powers in full. He does not lose any of them.

That's called a kenosis theology or a kenotic theology. He has them in full. He doesn't give them up.

But what he yields, again and again, is the independent use of them. He refuses to use his powers out of the Father's will. He will not do it.

So, did he have the ability to know all things? Yes. Did he exercise that sometimes in his earthly ministry? Yes. Always? No.

Does he now know the time of his return in his state of exaltation? Certainly, he does. So, the same person is both omniscient and ignorant. We cannot fully comprehend.

Or he is all-powerful, and when they come to arrest him, he says, I am and knocks down those who are coming after him. And yet he dies in weakness on the cross. And yet he dies in strength on the cross, with a shout, saying it is finished, the work he came to accomplish.

Two great mysteries of the Christian faith are the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the person of Christ, the one person with two natures. A third mystery that many of us share, who would understand a reformed soteriology, is not as important as the first two. The first two are essential to the Christian faith.

This one is not. But my understanding is this is not as important, not essential, but it's equally mysterious how God is absolutely sovereign in his creation and redemption and consummation, and yet human beings are responsible to this great God at the same time. I would appeal to compatibilism to try to explain that, but that's the time for another course.

I thus personally believe in three mysteries, as reformed theologians do, but would put this mystery between this dynamic complementarity between God's sovereignty and human freedom as definitely a lesser mystery and not one of the two essential mysteries of the church. They are the Trinity and the two natures of the person of Christ. Systematic theology is my discipline and is what this course is ultimately about.

It's built upon a careful study of the Bible, hence exegetical theology. It's built upon studying the Bible story as it unfolds, biblical theology. The most content of the first couple days lectures here, the first early lectures, is going to be on historical theology, which is trying to understand the church's attempts through successes and failures to understand the Bible's teachings outside of the Bible through the centuries.

It is certainly important for Christology to understand the early heresies, for example, since some of them are repeated today by aberrant groups. Systematic theology is our friend. It, as its name implies, it systematizes.

It puts things together to help us understand, and yet, at the same time, it has inherent weaknesses. For one, it separates what God has put together. I did a formal course of 20 hours on the work of Christ, and I'll say the same thing I did then.

Then I said, we're studying his saving work, but we're assuming he's a wonderful person because they're inseparable biblically. Now we're studying the person of Christ, or Christology, and I'll say it in the other direction. The very passages, those big four I mentioned, three of the four, explicitly mention his saving work.

John 1 does not, at least 1:1 to 18. A few verses later, John the Baptist does, mentioning calling Jesus the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, appealing to the sacrificial priestly motif of Christ's death in Scripture. But surely, Colossians 1 speaks of Christ's death as a reconciliation.

Philippians 2 mentions his death in terms of his state of humiliation, and Hebrews 1 verse 3, likewise, introduces a big theme of the book of Hebrews, not amplified in the first chapter, but that of his sacrifice, when it says he made purification. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. So, systematic theology does not apologize for separating things out so that we might be able to understand them, but we always need to remember to put back together what we have artificially and, hopefully, helpfully separated for understanding the person and work of Christ are inseparable, as we will see in the very passages that portray his person wonderfully, most clearly, and powerfully.

Even before starting the historical theology, I want to mention that to get these concepts in our minds just from the beginning, the Church's theology is controversial, especially in some aspects of it. It is true indeed here, and excuse me, I have now found my place. I'm sorry. I'll return to that in a moment, but for now, books.

I have found many books helpful over the years. Here are some I have found most helpful recently. Klaas Runia, *The Present Day Christological Debate*, clear, not overly academic, charitable, straightforward, by a solid European evangelical.

David Wells *The Person of Christ* is a very helpful book with his characteristic insights into matters of which he writes. Donald McLeod's *The Person of Christ* was my textbook for many years, teaching Christology in a seminary context. It's part of Gerald Bray's *Contours of Christian Theology*, IVP.

Donald McLeod, *The Person of Christ*, is a wonderful book. Likewise, more recently, Robert Lethem has written a systematic theology in which the Christology is very well done, and unlike some evangelicals, he deals with contemporary Christology in an accurate and yet constructively critical way. Bob Letham, *Systematic Theology*.

A very recent book is by my friend Stephen Wellum. He teaches theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. Steve's a very gifted man, and he's given us a book called *God the Son Incarnate*, part of John Feinberg's Foundations of Evangelical Theology series; and it is a strong book, very well done in terms of Bible, historical theology, systematics.

He's even contemporary in his addressing the present-day evangelical teaching of a practical kenosis, which Steve strongly opposes. Good people are teaching this, and I would be in his camp in that opposition. They say Jesus has all his divine powers, but he never uses them, which seems to be a practical kenosis to Steve, and I would agree with him on that. The last book I mentioned is just fantabulous and excellent beyond mention.

I'm speaking tongue-in-cheek here. It's a book I co-edited. I'm just trying to be funny.

I guess I didn't work, but that's okay. Christopher Morgan and I co-edited a book on the deity of Christ, a part of our theology and community series in which, as in all those books, we had biblical scholars write on different parts of the Bible and their testimony to Christ and then we had a historical theologian doing a chapter, systematic theology, and practical theology, all different aspects, essays, in one volume on the deity of Christ. The name of the book is *The Deity of Christ in the Theology and Community Series*.

I'm going to talk about classifying Christologies with the help of David Wells. We're still introducing matters here. I want you to have a feel for where we're going in the historical lectures because, indeed, the basis of classifying the Christologies is so critical.

Theologies have tended to fall in one or two categories, Wells tells us. They're either constructed around discontinuity between the being of God and the created order, or around their continuity. The former recognizes the alienation of faith from the Enlightenment culture, and the latter minimizes it.

That is, to be sure, a classification to which there are some exceptions, but overall it's a good distinction. Theologies that are built on discontinuity accept the differences between the natural and the supernatural and, in one way or another, present their Christology as the invasion of the divine into that domain which is natural and created. They are almost invariably high Christologies, which may even employ the older word-flesh language.

I'll distinguish word-flesh and word-man as the lectures develop and which yield not one iota of the divinity of Christ. Their worldview easily accommodates the presence of miracles, and it affirms the need for divinely initiated revelation. Theologies that stress continuity argue that the supernatural is revealed within the natural, and

therefore, miracles, in quotation marks, are often equated with the workings of natural law.

To those with eyes to see, a beautiful sunset or the regeneration of nature in spring are miracles, whereas for those without eyes to see, sunsets and spring times are simply sunsets and spring times. Because human nature is seen simply as a natural receptacle of the divine and as being infused with the divine, human insight is often thought to be the means of divine revelation. In biblical hermeneutics, therefore, the interpreter will often assume autonomy from the control of the text in the interest of giving revelation, which is contemporary.

This revelation, in the nature of the case, generally accords with, or at least can be made compatible with, operating norms in society. This is precisely what one would expect, for there's no metaphysical or noetic disjuncture between God and human nature, the supernatural and the natural. Christologies in this framework, which is in the framework of continuity between God and the created order, generally depict Jesus as the perfection of an existing religious consciousness that is common to all or most people.

These Christologies usually fall into the word man pattern, but one in which significant Chalcedonian elements are lost. They are Christologies which are constructed from below. They usually begin with what can be known of the historical Jesus, and the divine is conceived within the limits of what is human.

This, of course, often results in what is divine being equated with and thereby defined as extraordinary insight or profound moral consciousness. There's little or no substantial and personal union between the human and divine, but rather, an infusion of the latter is seen to have taken place in the former so that an atmosphere or aura is created within the human Jesus such that it can be said that God dwelled in him. Theologies which articulate the themes of discontinuity are almost invariably Chalcedonian in their outlook.

The modern intellectual world is seen as the context within which this Christology is to be affirmed, but not one from which this Christology should borrow any of its substance. The chief representatives of this approach would be from traditional Roman Catholicism, Anglo-Catholicism, Greek Orthodoxy, Conservative Protestantism, and some parts of Neo-Orthodoxy. We will see Karl Barth is very much in line with Chalcedon.

Theologies built upon continuity accept modifications within the Chalcedonian framework and see the modern world as providing not only the context but also the source for their Christology. This means that the degree of modification in Chalcedonian Orthodoxy will vary in direct proportion to the extent in which modernity has become determinative theologically. Proponents of this approach are

to be found in the older Protestant liberalism, as well as in its current recrudescence in such people as Langdon Gilkey, Edward Farley, and Gordon Kaufman, in Catholic modernism, and in some post-Vatican II Catholic theology, in process thought, and in some of the liberation theologies.

This bifurcation, which is rather clearly established and defined in the 20th century between theologies of continuity between God and the created order and discontinuity, was largely formulated in the 19th century, although it is the direct outcome of the enlightenment in the 18th century. Another way of talking about this all-important classification of Christologies into either continuity or discontinuity between God and the created order is to talk about, and this is more popular in jargon, and I like both ways, is to talk about Christologies from above and from below. Christologies from above start with the second person of the Trinity in heaven for all eternity with the Father and the Holy Spirit, right? Are you with me? And they then teach that the Son came down, you start from above, he became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, all right? That was the approach of the early church.

That was the approach of the reformers. That was the approach of the Puritans. That is the approach of the Gospel of John and of Paul and of Hebrews.

Theologies from below start with the man Jesus. Okay, now I distinguish between starting from above and starting from below absolutely and relatively, because Wolfhart Pannenberg, the famous German theologian, deliberately started from below, perhaps in contrast to Karl Barth, who somewhat devalued history in Pannenberg's understanding. I think he was right.

Barth was reacting against the old liberalism, which was very much a theology of continuity between God and the created order, and he emphasized discontinuity. Grenz and Olson have a good book called *20th Century Theology*, Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson, and their thesis, which is overdone, is that one theology after another is a reaction, and they either emphasize transcendence or imminence and usually overemphasize one or the other. There's a lot of truth to it, although perhaps every figure doesn't fit into that neatly, but so much does.

The older liberalism, imminence, so much so that brilliant German theologians and famous people were seduced by Adolf Hitler's teaching concerning the Third Reich and German nationalism being the kingdom of God. It's astonishing. Nine, Barth said, and he and others signed the Barman Declaration condemning Hitler, refusing to give the Hitler salute in the classroom, and that kind of stuff.

It's inconceivable to us that those great Germans were seduced by that, but they were. They were. They were liberal, and they were surely seduced by the culture, but Barth tried to preach that liberal theology he was taught, and as he said, it didn't

work, and so he discovered the strange world of the Bible and preached that, and the results were magnificent.

Am I claiming to be a Barthian? No. Is he right in every regard? No. Are his disciples as orthodox as he was? No.

Is he orthodox in every regard? No. Is he a breath of fresh air? Did he bring a new neo-orthodoxy in his time? Yes, as we will see when we study his Christology with quotations from his own writings. Just to be clear up front, problems.

His use of scripture is better than his view of scripture, and despite his protests, it looks to everybody else that his theology leads toward an absolute universalism in the end with the ultimate triumph of the grace of God. Theology from above, Christology from above. Christology from above, below.

Christology from above, Christology from below. If you start absolutely from below, you will never reach the truth, because it's a mere man Jesus. However, Pannenberg has taught us that one can start relatively from below.

That is, that could be your beginning point in terms of polemics or apologetics, your presentation to influence contemporary people. Pannenberg thought that was the only way to reach people today, especially in his European context, and so he starts with the man Jesus, but he unambiguously affirms the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, which proves that the ultimate starting point for him was from above, but that's unusual. By the way, starting from above is not without its problems too.

You see, here's where the problems come in. This is a mystery. The best a church can do is make affirmations acknowledging the mystery.

That's so important. Condemn errors, so you end up with parameters, right? Some of the Christologies from above never reached all the way down. As we'll see, the early church sometimes had trouble affirming the humanity of Jesus, in some cases at all.

What a different world. We have no problems affirming the humanity of everybody, including Jesus, affirming the humanity of Jesus fully, or affirming that the humanity of Jesus has any role to play in our salvation. So, there are errors, possible errors, all over the place here, but surely the traditional way of starting from above is right, and the Bible itself teaches a discontinuity between God and the created order.

Although the Son of God enters into the created order in his incarnation, by the way, one could say the gospel of Mark begins from below, with Jesus hurrying here and there, immediately doing this, and immediately doing that, and immediately casting out demons, and teaching, and helping, and healing, and so forth. Although to be

completely upfront, the very first verse speaks of him as the Son of God, which seems to me like an intimation of the approach from above.

Controversy theology. Much of Christian theology is controversy theology. It is God has used errors to promote the truth, to highlight the importance of the truth, to cause the church to say no, and then to struggle to say yes, as much as possible.

That was surely the case with Christology, and although we'll deal with these things in much detail later. Overview. Attacks on our Lord's deity.

Ebionism was a Jewish sect, probably the continuation of the Judaizers in the New Testament, who denied the deity of Christ outright. He is not God. But a much more subtle denial, and a Christian one, that is within the church, was Arianism, in which he affirmed that Jesus was the first, that the Son was the first creature of God, whom then God used to create.

So, he's affirming certain divine activities of the Son, and yet he said things like there was a time when the Son was not, and the Son is not of the same substance as the Father, which is their way of saying ultimately equal with the Father. The church rightly condemned not only Ebionism, obviously, but also Arianism. But there was a struggle, and as we'll see, based upon the political preference of the emperor of the Roman Empire, Arianism was tolerated for a century after Nicaea, in which it was put to rest, supposedly.

And poor Athanasius, who was just a bulldog in holding on to the deity of Christ, he would never let go. Five times, he was exiled from Alexandria. Five times, depending upon the preference of the emperor.

Why was he immovable? His theology was Eastern, okay, and so his doctrine of salvation is largely, not totally, but largely in terms of deification. But to put it in our terms, to be able to save us, Jesus Christ had to be God. If he's not God, he cannot save us.

That soteriological argument for the deity of Christ caused Athanasius to stand very firm, indeed. He ultimately won, but it was controversy theology, indeed—attacks on Christ's humanity.

At first, we may not regard these as serious as those on his deity, but they are as serious. If his deity is crucial because only God can save us, his humanity is crucial because only the God-man can save us. Atonement was not made by God in heaven.

Atonement was made by God on earth. He was fully God and fully man in one person. One of our human race died in our place.

Never a mere man, but the God-man suffered and died that we might be saved. He's the firstborn of many brothers. He's our forerunner.

He's the firstfruits. Docetism was a philosophy. It wasn't a group.

It wasn't the first church of the Docetists or something, and there's no guy named Doceo or something. It's a Greek word. It means to think, seem, or appear, and common to the various strange of Gnosticism was Docetism.

Christ was a phantom. This is hard to believe, isn't it? He was not really a man. To quote one of their slogans, he was a God who strode above the earth.

He walked above the earth. No, he was a God-man and very much walked on the earth and was nailed to a cross and died for sinners like us and was raised again the third day. Anyway, that was another frontal attack, just like the Ebionite attack on the deity of Christ.

Docetism was frontal. Gnosticism was very powerful, as we'll see, and the church had to fight for its existence because Gnosticism tied into the philosophical currents of the second century, big time. I had a Purchase for a Professor at one who said that if you could go back in a time capsule of the second century, there probably were more Gnostics than Christians.

Scary. Apollinarianism is another attack on the humanity of Christ, much more subtle. It held that God became a man, but it took John 1:14, I would say, overly literally.

The word became flesh. The son took a human body but not a human soul. Oh, but wait a minute.

In Greek psychology, human beings had a body, and they had an animating principle that gave them life, thought, and direction. In Apollinarianism, the word, the logos, took the place of the soul in the man Jesus. Is he a fully man? The church ultimately said, no, no, that's not a full humanity.

And that's wrong. Later on, one of the Cappadocian fathers said that what is not assumed cannot be saved or healed. That's brilliant.

He saved us body and soul. He became body and soul. Apollinarianism teaches a partial incarnation.

And it ultimately was also wrong attacks on our Lord's unipersonality. The fact that he's one person with two natures. Once again, there's a mystery here in the incarnation, and the errors fall off on one side of the other.

Eutychianism, after Eutychies, or monophysitism is another name, one nature. That's what monophysitism means. One nature-ism, if you will.

It's a confusing teaching, but it denied the distinction between the two natures in the person of Christ, ultimately. Ultimately, he just had one nature. Very confusing.

Nestorianism, on the other hand, divided Christ into two. At least, it seemed that way to Nestorius's opponent, Cyril. And the church agreed with him.

And Nestorius and Nestorianism was condemned. No, there's not a hybrid Christ, Eutychies. That's neither God nor man, but something else.

But perhaps only divine with his humanity absorbed into his deity. That's not right. And neither is he two persons.

No, he's one person with two natures. We don't fully understand the mystery, but we proclaim it and we guard it by condemning the errors. Lastly, attacks on the incarnation.

An error called adoptionism, nothing to do with the Bible's teaching on adoption, says there was a man, Jesus, and God adopted him and gave him the Holy Spirit without measure. And that's the so-called incarnation. That is no incarnation.

There is no man, Jesus, apart from the incarnation. There was no humanity of Christ prior to its conception in Mary's womb. God did not come and super-indwell a human being.

God created a human being, if you will, supernaturally in the Virgin's womb. I want to be careful how I say that. Mary was truly his mother.

She contributed to Jesus' humanity, which is what mothers contribute to their children. Her DNA, her chromosomes, were in Jesus' blood and body.

Kenoticism is another error attacking the incarnation. Kenosis is a Greek word, or kano is the verb used in Philippians chapter 2. He emptied himself, and we'll study this in more detail later on, but the notion is the Son of God possessed all divine attributes, but he divested himself of some of them when he became a human being. He emptied himself of aspects of his divinity. This is erroneous, and orthodoxy has confessed he is fully God and fully man in one person, not always using those attributes, using them only in the Father's will, but nevertheless possessing them.

In fact, all these things are more complicated. I just want to give you an and get things going on in the gray matter now that will flesh out later in their historical

context, and you'll understand them better. Once again, evangelical Christians are teaching a practical kenosis today, saying Jesus, they're saying correctly, Jesus did miracles by the Holy Spirit.

That is true. Then they say incorrectly that he only did miracles by the Holy Spirit. That is not true.

Is that heresy? Is that a damning doctrine? No, but it's erroneous doctrine. I agree with my friend Stephen Willem on that point. We should end our first lecture here, and I'll just introduce in our next hour, we will take up patristic Christology.

We will study, first of all, before Nicaea, the heresies. Here we are again with heresies. Jewish, monarchian, and gnostic heresies.

It's important to understand them because the church grappled with them, and God worked controversy theology toward the truth. Then orthodoxy, tracing Ignatius on his way to martyrdom. He said good things about Jesus.

Justin Martyr, one of the apologists. Irenaeus, Tertullian origin. Then the great council of Nicaea and Arianism, that whole debate and battle and the results, 325 Nicaea.

The developments between Nicaea and Chalcedon, as well as false paths, include Apollinarianism, Nestorianism, and Monophysitism. You say, so many heresies. That's the way it is.

That's true. Then, the great council of Chalcedon in 451, including its creeds and five essential truths that come from it. Thank you for your good attention.

This is Dr. Robert Peterson in his teaching on Christology. This is session 1, Introduction Overview.